BRITISH AND FRENCH ART IN THE WAR

Two Exhibitions of Paintings And Drawings Done at the Front

By Royal Cortissoz

Where the relation of art to the war has been concerned the British have made a good record. The government has commissioned men of talent to illustrate scenes at the front and among the war industries at home. Wherever the artist could be of service he has been given his chance. The result is a body of work—including posters, lithographs, drawings and paintings—in which the authorities may fairly claim to have done the best they could for posterity, accumulating historical documents such as the indispensable camera could not hope to produce. Some specimens of this work have already been made familiar in the United States. A fine collection of British lithographs was shown in several of our cities under official auspices, and it reappeared in the Allied War Salon which was held in New York last December. But there has not hitherto been such a demonstration of what the British school has done as the one now being made at the Anderson Galleries through the good offices of the London Ministry of Information. In this exhibition we may see national artistic effort at full length, so to say, and at its best.

Sir William Orpen

It is national or nothing. If there is one trait which more than any other leaps to the eye from this collection of over 200 paintings and drawings it is British sincerity, the persistence among all the men represented of a quiet resolution to keep the facts in the foreground, without any attempt to dramatize them or force them into a "picturesque" envelope. The hero of the show—from certain points of view—is the least emotional of them all. He registers the truth with the dispassionate accuracy of a topographer working under the orders of a military superior. He is as brilliant as it is possible for a man to be who has not a trace of imagination in his makeup. This artist is Sir William Orpen, who fills the bulk of the space with a collection quite large enough—and quite interesting enough—to have furnished forth a show by itself. He is remembered here from the exhibition he held at the Knoedler gallery three years ago. We welcomed that affair because it satisfied curiosity as to a type not up to that time known in our galleries and because it brought forward a clever painter. But we could not regard the cleverness as any greater than that of an adroit Royal Academician who had acquired something of the cosmopolitan touch of the Salonnier, and to-day, even though his experiences of the war have intervened, Orpen leaves the same impression. We look at his work with respect for its sound technique and with that eager interest which the nature of his subject is bound to command. It cannot be said that he stirs us to unqualified imagination, that he makes us feel his subject as a thing heightened, transmogrified. He is too cold-blooded a realist for that, and, in style, too modestly endowed.

Orpen's best achievements are his drawings, and, after them, his portraits. In the former he uses with extraordinarily uniform power the clean, strong line which is his chief resource. His figures are freely enough, yet, in a subtle sense, rather formally, apprehended. That is to say, that, while they are not exactly immobile, they nevertheless have a little of that isolated, posed quality which one might expect in, say, a book on "Types of the British Army." One feels that these are not so much impressions caught on the wing as carefully wrought reports, prepared with a view to their being filed in the archives of the war. It might seem an unimportant, if not negligible, point until you begin to realize that it deprives the drawings of beauty, of charm. Orpen is a strong, but not a distinguished draftsman. His line is competent, but

WOUNDED IN THE CHEST
(From the drawing by Sir William Orpen at the Anderson Galleries)

it is not made magical by the eloquence of personality. We value his drawings enormously for what they say. We remain comparatively indifferent to the manner in which they say it. The portraits bear out this conviction. For a certain forcible realism they would be hard to beat. It would be impossible, in fact, we are inclined to say, to surpass in simple directness, in vitalizing skill, these workmanlike presentments of Foch, Haig and a whole company of lower officers. Before each any every one of them we believe that we are in the presence of a "speaking likeness," if ever there was such a thing. What we miss is the accent of invention, of artistic character. Now and then Orpen's portraiture rises in sheer technical virtuosity to a point at which he almost, if not quite, takes us captive. The "Major General Sir H. M. Trenchard" supplies an effective instance. Drawing and brushwork are here positively exhilarating. Yet even this portrait fails to wear well, as it were, to stay in the mind as a work of creative art. That last glamour is, indeed, denied to Orpen, and the fulness of the denial is only made the more manifest when we turn to his miscellaneous subjects, landscapes and the like.

They have the virtue of truth, we repeat, and in his panorama of war, as in his studies of types, the artist does precisely what the government doubtless wanted him to do—he brings home a telling record. If only he would make the record fascinating for its own sake! There is, too, about all his French scenes, a curious, rather disconcerting quality as regards the color. We have heard of the strange whiteness resulting from the churning up of the chalky soil, but this does not altogether account for Orpen's sedulously light key. There are pictures of his, like "The Big Crater, No. 2," which look as though they had been painted in the Arctic, and all through his landscape work he adheres to a gamut of whites, pinks and blues puzzling in the extreme. They find no warrant in the tints of other artists, including his own colleagues on this occasion, who have painted similar scenes. And ruminating over this detail we come to the point which throughout asserts itself as we survey Orpen's paintings and drawings. He is an artist of manner rather than of style, a sound but absolutely uninspired craftsman. With his pure, somewhat flat color, with his neat, firm, staccato touch he sets down exactly what he sees—and he has a

THE BRITISH AND FRENCH A. P. M.'S IN THEIR CELLAR IN AMIENS
(From the painting by Sir William Orpen at the Anderson Galleries)

ruthlessly sharp eye. We end as we began, regarding him with immense respect. But with how much more gratitude would we observe these works if they were a little less mechanically groomed, if we could discern in them something which Orpen had not only only seen but felt!

McBey, Bone and Others

It is not the dramatic spirit that we miss so much. As we have noted before, in dealing with the Allied War Salon, the great conflict just ended has from its peculiar conditions discouraged the production of the dramatic battle picture. If there is no Lady Butler, for example, in this show, it is for the good reason that there was no "Scotland Forever" sort of thing to call for such a type. The thing of which we feel cheated among Orpen's paintings and drawings is the pictorial invention, the emotion, the quality of style, which will take the place of drama. In an exhibition by an American artist, Mr. S. J. Woolf, which was traversed in this place last Sunday, there was a hint of the point at which we are driving. In style he, too, has much to seek, and he is not Orpen's equal as a craftsman, but he seeks to give his work an individualized, painter-like quality, to get away from routine, and there you have the root of the matter. Remark how in this exhibition, where, as we have said, Orpen is the hero, looming most conspicuously, coming well into the foreground, the true honors must nevertheless go to certain men who are nominally of lesser significance. Remark, for example, the pictures by the etcher James McBey. He has been in Palestine, with Allenby. He has drawn the entry of the Allies into Jerusalem, a camel corps marching in the night to Beersheba, the bombardment of Gaza, and so on. And he has drawn these things not as a reporter, but as an artist, beguiled by effects of form, color, movement, and translating them into an idiom of his own. To say that he draws well, that his color is light and charming, is not enough. It is because that idiom of his is his own that he holds us. We see the war in the East through his temperament, and it is an interesting temperament. Prodigious tales are told about the Orpen collection—how it was sent home bit by bit in an aeroplane and how it is valued at something like a million dollars. We have heard no such anecdotes about Mr. McBey's performances. But in intrinsic beauty they make the backbone of this exhibition.

With them we would cite the drawings by Muirhead Bone, especially the "H. M. S. Vindictive After Zeebrugge" and the "Repairing a Torpedoed Ship." In these you see how style comes to the artist's rescue, overlaying upon a seemingly ungrateful theme an attraction only second to that of creative design. It is draughtsmanship raised to a higher power, giving to a web of lines reporting prosaic facts the witchery of beauty. It is personality come into its own. It is the transformation of a documentary record into a work by Muirhead Bone. Another artist from whom something of the same illumination might have been expected, Sir John Lavery, is represented by four or five canvases; but while he discloses his characteristic authority in "A British Aerdrome" and "A London Drawing Room, Wartime," he fails to make either of these a fresh, compelling picture. Mr. C. R. W. Nevinson also piques expectation, for another reason. He has dabbled in cubism. He has more than one picture here designed under the mystic sign of that quaint hypothesis. But it is interesting to note his proof of what we have repeatedly argued, that the war was not going to act in any talismanic way upon art, developing new methods, encouraging any revolutionary principles. Mr. Nevinson's cubustic paintings, like "Looking Down on a Bombarded Town," are merely absurd, their tragic substance doing nothing to save their preposterous form. He succeeds just in proportion as he keeps his feet upon the solid earth and paints, if you like, conventionally. Let it be said for convention, in this case at all events, that it is impressive, moving. Mr. Nevinson is very good in those pictures in which he is content to "dip his brush in earthquake and eclipse," depicting the horrors of war in straightforward fashion. He is not, any more than Orpen, a great artist, but he is one of sincerity and force. He is, perhaps, the leader in the group composed otherwise of the two Nashes, Eric Kennington, Bernard Meninsky and divers others, a group of grim, painstaking realists. It may not be thrilling, but it does capable work.

This is, to tell the truth, the conclusion to which we are led by the exhibition as a whole. It has its high lights. Besides the delightful contributions of James McBey and Muirhead Bone, there are some stunning lithographs by G. Spencer Pryse, a single painting illustrates the austerely beguiling art of Augustus John, and Mr. Brangwyn also introduces an individual note. But the British artist at the war has stayed true to form, he has exemplified the pedestrian virtues of the Royal Academy rather than those original traits for which it is impossible not to sigh. One needs to be careful in this matter, not to sigh for the unattainable, not to ask any artist to be somebody else. Nor can we too often reiterate that the war has not, in the nature of things, promised to summon genius out of the vasty deep. We must be grateful, simply, for what we receive, and be doubly grateful when as the fruit of Britain's effort we receive, at least, the truth. At the same time, let us look the facts in the face and recognize that it is just the truth, and good workmanship, that this exhibition puts before us. As regards invention, creative fire, originality, beauty, style, it leaves the subject much where it found it.

The Frenchmen

Very different from the British display is the exhibition of war paintings by soldiers of France, which is being held at the Gimpel & Wildenstein gallery, under the auspices of the French High Commission. This show, like the other, has obviously its official *cachet*, but in character it is essentially casual, informal. Introduced as a collection of paintings it seems rather a collection of sketches, of notes spontaneously made by the ninety soldiers named in the catalogue. The book embraces a few biographical details and from these we gather that cartoonists and engravers, as well as painters, are in the valiant company. A few men of wide repute are included. One of them, Georges Scott, the well known illustrator, makes the most salient contribution, a group of pictures well designed and well drawn, full of fire. There are some admirable subjects by the satrical Jean Veber, delectable sketches of children by Poulbot, drawings by the vigorous Lucien Jonas, and some particularly fine bits of color, atmospheric in quality, by the accomplished Andre Devambez. These are essentially professional in attack, men of training whose work makes a sufficiently aggressive appeal. Charles Fouqueray belongs in the same category. The portraits of types in his picture of "The Prisoners: Belleau Wood," are superb. Above the average, too, are the cartoons of Jacques Nam, fantasies drawn with delightful spirit in black and white and in colors. In general, however, the show makes us think far less of the sophistication of the salon than of the ordinary aptitude of moderately accomplished men, occupying their leisure in the trenches with brush and pencil.

They delineate the traits and movements of their comrades, note trifles of humor and sentiment, and occasionally rise to the tragic plane, as Jean Dufour does in his picture of the French prisoner tied to a post on the Russian front, barbed wire all around him and a deep pool at his feet. The recurrence of the humorous emphasis is remarkable. Even the Hun is drawn with a sardonic touch, as in the sketch by E. Cocard of new arrivals in the prison pen. There are instances of a larger, broader view of war's scene. Raoul Lespagne affords one in his admirable "Ruins of Revigny." There is another in Alexis Demarle's "Plateau of Tavanne," and a third, which is especially ingratiating, is M. Barrière's little picture of "A .120 in Lorraine," a capital impression of one of the great guns. But the collection as a collection—and it is fairly voluminous—is one of sketch book fragments rather than of pictorial achievements in any ambitious sense. It is not, indeed, of artistic ambition at all that we are conscious as we survey these souvenirs of the war. It is, instead, of everyday human traits, of brave men relieving an intolerable routine with unpretentious artistic excursions, dashing off slight memoranda of dreary scenes, affirming not so much dexterity of hand as a simple, manly courage. The French government, we dare say, will assemble much more imposing groups of paintings and drawings having commemorative value. But it will assemble no impressions of the rank and file more intimate or more personal than these.

MEMORY
(From the statue by Daniel Chester French at the Knoedler Gallery)

Random Impressions In Current Exhibitions

Pictures for the spring exhibition of the National Academy of Design will be received at the Fine Arts Building on March 5 and 6. The show will be open to the public on Saturday, March 22, and will last until Sunday, April 27. The usual prizes, six in number, will be awarded.

At the Arden gallery there is an exhibition of pictures by Mr. John C. Johansen, painted to illustrate the shipbuilding industries under government control during the period of the war. They are the best things this artist has thus far produced, technically. His control of his medium seems easier and firmer than ever. His color is more restrained than we have known it to be in the past, and it has a better quality. And all this we appreciate the more because Mr. Johansen has had a most difficult subject with which to deal. It is a war-time superstition that any subject connected with the war necessarily makes good material for the artist. A drawing made in a machine shop must of course be interesting if the machine being produced is some sort of a weapon. As a matter of fact, this theory may be overdone. A good many of the factory and similar drawings produced by the war are tiresome enough, even some of those made by that brilliant draftsman, Muirhead Bone. The explanation is simple. It is that a man must have a very powerful pictorial faculty, a genuine gift for composition, if he is to extort anything from purely mechanical motives. This is where Mr. Johansen has had to meet his severest test.

He has brought, as we have said, an uncommonly strong technical equipment to the portrayal of his vast webs of timber or steel. He has made the portraits faithful, and, from the point of view of pure actuality, interesting. He transports us to Hog Island and the other shipyards, and so initiates us into their atmosphere that we feel vividly aware of their crowds of workmen, their sounds as of a multitude of hammers and their positively thrilling moments as when a great hull is about to take the water. We enjoy the sense of movement he conveys. Local color, local sentiment, are perfectly communicated. Beyond this Mr. Johansen is baffled. He strives manfully and with much ingenuity to give his subjects unity, to make pictures out of them. But his subjects are terribly stubborn. We can barely see the wood for the trees. While we are savoring the wholesome truth in this work the artistic charm which should be imposed upon it somehow eludes us. That, we fear, is because it eludes Mr. Johansen. Perhaps if he had not come to quite such close quarters with his theme he would have made more amusing paintings out of it. In a bigger perspective it might have yielded more interesting effects of design. But we are not sure. Mr. Johansen has possibly got all that there is to be got out of shipyards packed with great hulls in course of construction.

It is an event in the annals of American sculpture when an artist produces such a statue as the "Memory," which Mr. Daniel Chester French shows at the Knoedler gallery. It is an event for two reasons. In the first place, our school is no richer than any other in works of genuine, sustained idealism. Secondly, the cult for Rodin has overwhelmed us with nudes of the "melting" variety, nudes which reveal a certain facility in the sensuous modulation of surface but disclose no knowledge of structure. What makes this statue important is largely its character as a piece of organic sculpture, an authentic study of form, made beautiful through technical mastery. Mr. French has done more than one fine thing in his time, but never anything quite so fine, because quite so masterly, as this.

In conception the figure is of the renaissance. The seated woman gazing in a mirror that she holds in her left hand, lowered to the level of her knee, is posed with absolute naturalness. The right knee, drawn up above the other, is so aranged as to involve a certain muscular play. Just so were Signorelli in painting and Michael Angelo in sculpture wont to fix an attitude with an interest alike in artistic design and in anatomical form. Not only in his treatment of the legs, but everywhere in the body and especially in the exquisite back Mr. French has kept his statue intensely human, a realist's study from the life, modelled with minute research into structural nuance. That is the first impression received from his "Memory," and, as we have said, stress should be laid upon it in view of the comparative rarity of such thoroughgoing craftsmanship in the plastic arts. It is a nude modelled from within outward, built up upon the very substance of human bone and flesh, its palpitating vitality suggesting no mere virtuosity, but a solid grasp upon sculptural truths. Then, upon this firm foundation, he establishes the imponderable fabric which we must attribute to a purely imaginative impulse, the spiritual embodiment of "Memory," the image of grace and revery which is the culmination of his aim. It is a lofty ideal that he has expressed. Greek in its fineness and serenity, but again we prefer to recall the renaissance for its prototypes, there is so much in it of warmth, of tender human feeling.

We began by rejoicing in Mr. French's technique, so learned, so sure, so polished, and, in this instance, with a personal quality he has never before so vividly disclosed. But we go on to rejoice in his revelation of a noble idea. In composition he has been thoughtful in an eminent degree. The statue declares its beauty from whatever point of view it is regarded. The back, as we have indicated, is one of its finest points. The line of the right side, from the shoulder to the hip, where the background develops some rich intricacies of light and shade, is also evidence of the technician's artful skill. But, over and above the skill to which the marble testifies, we would applaud the stroke of creative art which Mr. French has here achieved. His great distinction in so authoritatively modelling this "Memory" lies, above all, in having made an original and beautiful addition to the small company of our works of imagination in marble.

Four artists contribute to the current exhibition at the Whitney Studio, Miriam Gerstle, William G. Watt, Charles P. Rising and S. A. Guarina. They show wood engravings, monotypes, charcoal drawings and color plates. The display lasts until February 27.

There was opened yesterday, at the American Art Galleries, an exhibition of the collection formed by the late Major General James Franklin Bell. It includes rare North American Indian baskets and blankets, Philippine arms and weapons, hand-woven fabrics, including the little known death blankets, and other objects of curious or historical interest. These will be sold next Friday afternoon.

The Anderson galleries announce the exhibition of objects of art from the Far East consigned by Lee Van Ching, the Shanghai dealer. The collection consists of porcelains, textiles, crystals, snuff bottles and other antiquities. It is to be sold next Friday and Saturday afternoons.

That brilliant French writer, the late Octave Mirbeau, was passionately devoted to his profession, and as a memorial to him his widow proposes to transform his villa of Cheverchmont into a place in which authors, painters, sculptors and musicians maltreated by fate may seek a brief rest. To this end she is selling her husband's collection at the Durand-Ruel galleries, in Paris, on the 24th of this month. From the catalogue, just received, we gather that M. Mirbeau was faithful in his artistic predilections to the independent standards signallized in his books. The impressionists are present, Monet, Renoir, Pissarro and Berthe Morisot, and the post-impressionists are in even more assertive form. Cézanne is richly represented, and there are pictures by Van Gogh and Gauguin. For the rest, the collection of about fourscore pieces is chiefly remarkable for a strong group of small sculptures by Maillol and a notable array of works by Rodin, drawings and sculptures.

The Civic Club, at 14 West Twelfth Street, announces a free exhibition of drawings, etchings, lithographs and watercolors by a representative group of New York artists. Among those exhibiting are George Bellows, Cornelia Barnes, Jerome Myers, W. Aurbach Levy, Boardman Robinson, John Sloan, Maurice Sterne and William Zorach. The Civic Club has devoted the use of the art gallery formerly that of the Salmagundi Club to furthering the æsthetic side of civic life in New York without thought of material benefit. The pictures in the present exhibit were selected by the artists themselves as favorites for the occasion.

Calendar of Exhibitions

American Art Galleries, Madison Square South—The James Franklin Bell collection of Philippine and Indian arms and weapons, baskets and curios; to February 14. From February 12 to 15, American paintings collected by Robert Morrison Olyphant, and paintings, antique furniture, glassware, ceramics and tapestries from the estate of the late Miss Mary E. Garrett.

Anderson Galleries, Park Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street—British war exhibit of pictures; to February 26; weekdays, 10 a. m. to 10 p. m.; Sundays, 3 a. m. to 8 p. m.; admission, 50 cents. Lee Van Ching collection of Chinese art objects; to February 14.

Art Alliance of America, 10 East Forty-seventh Street—Ancient and modern textiles; to February 15.

Arlington Galleries, 247 Madison Avenue—Paintings and miniatures by Nicolas Macsoud; to February 15.

Art Students' League, 215 West Fifty-seventh Street—Drawings by Captain Wallace Morgan and watercolors by Gifford Beal; to February 15.

Arden Studios, 599 Fifth Avenue—Paintings of shipbuilding industries during war by John J. Johansen; to February 15.

Babcock Galleries, 19 East Forty-ninth Street—Western Genre Painters; to March 1.

Bourgeois Galleries, 668 Fifth Avenue—Paintings and drawings by Jennings Tofel; from February 8 to March 1.

Civic Club, 14 West Twelfth Street—Drawings, etchings, lithographs and watercolors by New York artists; to February 24.

Daniel Galleries, 2 West Forty-seventh Street—Recent work by Daniel Halpert; to February 15.

Ferargil Gallery, 24 East Forty-ninth Street—Works by Edward L. Redfield; through February.

Folsom Galleries, 560 Fifth Avenue—Paintings by William MacGregor Paxton; to March 8.

Gimpel & Wildenstein, 647 Fifth Avenue—War pictures by artist soldiers of France; to February 18.

Keppel & Co., 4 East Thirty-ninth Street—Etchings by Rembrandt; to February 15.

Knoedler Galleries, 556 Fifth Avenue—Sculpture by E. P. Quinn and Daniel C. French; Whistler lithographs.

Kraushaar Galleries, 20 Fifth Avenue—Decorative panels and paintings by Vincent Tack; to February 15.

Milch Galleries, 108 West Fifty-seventh Street—Paintings and drawings done at front by S. J. Woolf; to February 15.

Macbeth Galleries, 450 Fifth Avenue—Paintings by C. H. Davis and Paul Dougherty.

Mussman Gallery, 144 West Fifty-seventh Street—Watercolors by Caroline Van H. Bean; to February 15.

Montross Galleries, 550 Fifth Avenue—Paintings by Gari Melchers; to February 15.

National Arts Club, 19 East Nineteenth Street—Annual exhibition of American Watercolor Society.

Salmagundi Club, 47 Fifth Avenue—Paintings by members; to February 14.